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ABSTRACT

In their book, "The Diverted Dream," Brint and Karabel describe the growth of the American community college movement from 1900 to 1985 and claim that the colleges no longer act as stepping stones to four-year colleges and universities. Instead, the authors claim, the colleges are vocationalizing curricula and focusing on preparing students for work, thus limiting their opportunities for advancement in American society. The book provided historical research and a case study of Massachusetts community colleges to show that the community college used an institutional model, rather than a consumer's choice or business model, to transform into predominantly vocational schools and that this model was strongly influenced by college leaders seeking a niche for the colleges in higher education. While the book received both favorable and negative reviews, the most laudatory were written by social science researchers, citing the book's well-researched history and placement of the colleges within an institutional context. Reviews written by vocational advocates and community college personnel tended to challenge the authors' conclusions, arguing that the institutional samples used in the analyses were too limited or not representative. Regardless of the different reactions, the book presents an important challenge to college leaders to establish sound measures of effectiveness and begin collecting solid data on college outcomes. Contains 10 references and a list of 17 reviews of the book. (AJL)

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The Diverted Dream Revisited

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The Diverted Dream Revisited

The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985, by Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel, New York: Oxford University Press, 200 Madison Avenue, 1989, 312 pages, $24.95.

Introduction

The book, The Diverted Dream, by Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel captured the attention of many individuals in various fields. According to published book reviews and opinions, current leaders and advocates of the community college movement did not take too kindly to what the authors presented. In their book, Brint and Karabel argue that over the course of its history, the junior or community college attempted to perform a number of conflicting tasks. Mainly, they claimed, that by virtue of its position in the structure of educational and social stratification, the junior college leadership has diverted the aspirations of students who wish to join the professional and managerial upper middle class by vocationalizing their institutions, and committing to programs that discourage students from transferring to senior-level educational institutions.

Following the book's release, there was an immediate rejection of the findings by community college leaders. This response was quick and defensive; too quick to allow the interpretation to be meaningful. Seemingly, others in the higher education community tended to be more tolerant of Brint and Karabel's position.

The position taken in this article is not to debate the issue of who's right, the critics or the "shibboleths". A portion of this article examines

published reviews of the book. The reception of the book by professionals in education is particularly noteworthy. The Diverted Dream received the distinguished "Book of the Year" by two councils, the American Education Research Association (AERA) and the Council of Universities and Colleges (CUC), in 1990.

Apparently, community college professionals had no time for the book judging by their defensive posture. This uncordial reception is not unprecedented. Another important contribution to community college literature, Literacy in the Open-Access College, by Richardson, Fisk and Okun (1983), showed how reading and writing requirements had been reduced in one representative community college. Unfortunately the message in this book died simply because it did not contain what practitioners wanted to hear. We fear The Diverted Dream may die for similar reasons. Therefore, a reason for this revisitation is to give recognition to the theme and content of the work while it is still a relatively current topic for debate. We hope to keep the issue in the forefront until the true message reaches a higher level of regard.

Overview of Book

The Diverted Dream describes the growth of the American junior college from 1900 to 1985. The authors, Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel, sociology professors at Yale and University of California at Berkeley respectively, argue that a system of colleges dedicated to producing an efficient labor force is a far cry from the democratic ideal of higher education. In the book they suggested that junior or community colleges used an institutional model, rather than a consumer choice or a business model--to transform the institutions into predominantly vocational schools.

The authors claimed that the institutional model was strongly influenced by the national leadership. When these leaders realized that four-year schools had already achieved status and key relationships with the business community, they tried to find their niche within the educational system. That niche was vocationalism.

According to the authors, community colleges no longer serve as stepping stones to four year institutions. Instead, they largely prepare students for work, thus limiting their opportunities for advancement in American society. The authors focused on the complex set of social and economic factors that led to the transformation of community colleges from transfer-oriented institutions to vocational ones. They demonstrated how the revised vocational mission impacts opportunities for social mobility. In addition, they detailed the institutional factors that led community colleges to develop a change in mission.

The book is divided into two major sections. Three chapters in the first section trace a historical change in emphasis from liberal arts to vocational training in three segments: a 1900-1945 "movement"; a 1946-1970 "takeoff"; and a 1970-1985 "great transformation." The second section is a case study of the Massachusetts community college system. It includes three chapters focusing on the details of the transformation as it developed in Massachusetts.

A Broader Interpretation

In our view, it is indisputable that institutions became vocational. Brint and Karabel were looking backwards to see why it happened. It is important to observe that they did not see vocationalization as a conscious intent at the level of the institutions. Instead, their argument is that the

one place were there was conscious intent to vocationalize was at the level of leadership or, as Brint and Karabel called them, the "vanguards", represented by "the association". The association to which they refer is the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC), the forerunner of the present American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, (AACJC). Brint and Karabel's premise was an argument that said the community college had to find a place because it was not accepted as higher education and it would not let itself be seen as a secondary school or technical institute. Therefore, a decision was made by people at the leadership level to emphasize the occupational programs.

Education is influenced by ideology. From the perspective of Brint and Karabel, it was the ideology of a group who got at the policy-making level, not at the campus level, and influenced national legislation which set the agenda. Campus presidents did not form their own opinion or engage in individual interpretation of what their niche should be. Instead they succumbed to national influence and national policies.

For other interpretations, we examined the views of those who published reviews of the book. Some of the reviews were purely descriptive, offering no interpretation in agreement or disagreement with Brint and Karabel's premise. There were other reviewers who took issue with the authors. A synopsis of the reviews is provided.

Analysis of Published Reviews

Seventeen published reviews were obtained. Twelve of the published reviews appeared in respected education, science, sociology, and history journals; two reviews appeared in the book review sections of major newspapers. (see reference section for complete listing)

Two distinct camps emerged in the reviews; those who supported and those who disputed the claims. Those most laudatory of Brint and Karabel's work were social science researchers. For example, Zwerling (1989, p. 50) credits the authors with developing "the definitive revisionist history" of the community college movement. Several other reviewers (Levine; Richardson, 1990) commented on the history as well researched and comprehensive. Kempner (1990, p. 711) said "the study legitimizes further the debate on the social role of community colleges in American society." Neufeldt (1991) thought the authors should be commended for looking at the evidence. McSeveney not only referred to it as carefully researched, but called it "a significant contribution to our understanding of an important and relatively new development in higher education--the community college" (1991, p. 975).

Clark (1990) concluded the book's "greatest sociological contribution was the authors' insistence on an institutional perspective that portrayed officials as active participants who reacted to and shaped external demands." This organizational approach, he suggested, "will help sociologists who normally analyze education quantitatively as a stratification phenomenon to grasp, finally, that the intricate actions of bureaucrats and professionals have much to do with the steering of schools and colleges" (p. 504).

Several reviewers were mildly critical of Brint and Karabel for an incomplete analysis of the enrollment patterns in community colleges (Wechsler; Kempner, 1990). Selecting Massachusetts to conduct their case study was faulted as not representing the mainstream (Clark; Levine; Richardson, 1990). Some comments praised the community college. According to The Wilson Quarterly (1989, p. 36), "there is no greater

testament to this nation's worship of equality of opportunity than its two-year community colleges." Richardson (1990) thought the book "should be lauded for its critical appraisal of practices that are often accepted as praiseworthy without examination, and for placing the community college within a system context" (p. 53) .

The Community College Reaction

Reviews written by vocational advocates and community college personnel provide an interesting contrast to reviewers employed in or writing on behalf of senior colleges. Kempner (1990) was right when he stated that community college proponents will not be pleased with Brint and Karabel's analysis. An editorial in Community College Week (Staff, 1990) accurately predicted that vocational administrators would challenge the conclusions in defense of their programs, "and bring forth various anecdotal reports of student success" (p. 3).

Suggesting that "conclusions reached in the book were based upon a limited sample of interviews" (Parnell, 1989, p. 2), and "their historical analysis relies almost exclusively on secondary sources" (Staff, 1990, p. 3), were typical of the responses. Gilli (1991, p. 55) said the book "deserves to be put aside and ignored." After accusing the authors of reaching their conclusion by using a limited sample in only one state having 12 or 13 colleges, Parnell (1989) sighted two studies from two states. One study, conducted in Washington, mentioned that one-third of the students who received bachelor's degrees from four-year institutions transferred credit from a community college. The other study involved Arizona where almost half of the four-year college graduates were community college transfer students. Although it may be accurate, his response was drawn on a limited

sample. Parnell claimed that the authors oversimplified the situation by suggesting that community colleges have become mere vocational schools. There are studies that suggest very high levels of satisfaction with community colleges; however, Parnell offered no evidence to even remotely suggest that Brint and Karabel were mistaken. We do agree, as Gilli summarized, "how one views vocational education depends on where one sits" (1991, p. 55).

Analysis of Opinions

After having revisited the book, it is our conclusion that of the two major sections in the book, the historical development was the strong point of their qualitative study. Brint and Karabel used an objective eye and even went into primary sources for historical data. Their use of Massachusetts for a case study may have produced "ivy league" tendencies, as Clark (1990, p. 505) implied when he said it contained a "pile of anomalies". Richardson (1990) claimed the Massachusetts governance structure is quite consistent with the book's focus on a top-down leadership conspiracy to promote vocationalization. He also suggested that the case study was used to support a hypothesis rather than inductively derive one. Regardless, we believe selecting the Massachusetts community college system to conduct the case study was not to generalize findings, but to better understand how institutions in a single state became vocational. Despite what other reviewers might have thought, we view their use of Massachusetts as a target of convenience as it is close in proximity to their research base.

The issue of diversion is important to examine. Brint and Karabel accuse the community college of being fundamentally dishonest in diverting students attention away from the collegiate curriculum. We do not observe

any evidence to argue forcefully that students are being diverted against their wishes. Neufeldt (1991, p. 64) believed Brint and Karabel left many questions unanswered "about why vocationalizers were able to stamp their image on the two-year college so completely". On this point, Grubb (1991) thought it was inappropriate to blame the institution for the decline of transfer if students freely choose vocational programs. Kempner (1990, p. 710) noted that although the research "offers excellent descriptive information, it fails to consider fully how the changing composition and diversity of community college students affects college programs and the outcomes of these students". Seemingly, the reviewers were looking for explanations to all the tough issues in one, abridged book.

Brint and Karabel's contribution provides the impetus for an ongoing debate. Some of the issues that surfaced will undoubtedly form the future agenda. For example, Kempner (1990, p. 711) stated that "rather than accepting Brint and Karabel's premise that the dream has been diverted, perhaps we should recognize that the community college dream is still evolving". Teitel (1991, p. 7) would argue that the current debate about "vocationalism" is nothing less than a debate over the future mission of the community college. Perhaps what will evolve is a clearer definition of what community colleges do. Clowes and Levin (1989, p. 349) mentioned studies by Cross (1983) and McCartan (1983) as evidence that there are changes to the mission, but the direction of that change is not clear. Clark (1990) said that unanchored drift [of mission] will lead to a loss of salient purpose of any kind. Perhaps it is time to decide what the community college's true niche is. To think it can continue to be the same comprehensive institution that history documented given the current and projected economic perspective is probably misguided. A compromise of

mission is likely. Clowes and Levin (1989) believed the only viable core function for most community colleges is career education.

According to Cohen (1990), the perception that higher education is particularly to be used for occupational training is pervasive among students in all types of institutions. Cohen (1990, p. 429) cited Astin's findings that 86 percent of the entering freshmen in two-year colleges and 81 percent in four-year colleges noted "to get a better job" as a very important reason in deciding to go to college. Others (Bernstein 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini; McGrath and Spear, 1991), in addition to Brint and Karabel, have suggested that community colleges reconsider the role of transfer programs. However, a possible cause of low transfer rates, which Brint and Karabel treat lightly, is the lack of coordination between two-and-four-year institutions. The removal of barriers would promote better articulation efforts that may contribute to increased persistence in higher education.

We believe it is time to decide what the community college mission will be as we prepare to enter the 21st century. Securing information on how well the community college accomplishes what it says it will do is essential in making that decision. Responding with evidence is one lesson Brint and Karabel brought to the forefront.

The Lesson To Community Colleges

Brint and Karabel caused a great awakening among practitioners in community colleges. After more than 10 years of research in the field, the authors developed a compelling argument. Whenever practitioners think of community college critics, a certain group of scholars comes to mind. Practitioners dismiss the critic's message by suggesting they do not

understand reality or have not spent time working in the trenches. Yet there are other critics who command responsive attention. Consider the local and national policymakers, many of whom never set foot on our campuses nor worked in our institutions. Although one may not agree with their assumptions, one typically responds to their demands with a sense of urgency and compliance. Policymakers are, in their own right, critics. The point is that no matter who the critics are, scholars investigating the community college movement or legislators interested in community college effectiveness, they both deserve attention.

Brint and Karabel provide a valuable lesson. They found something that community college leaders could not defend. In the written reviews, for example, community college leaders did not adequately defend their position. The real contribution of Brint and Karabel's work, we believe, lies in the challenge they present to community college leaders. They're challenging campus leaders to take action in establishing measures of effectiveness. Sometimes, the best defense is a good offense. Community college leaders need good data to respond to the critics. The data we envision consist of achievement standards, not opportunity standards. We have no disagreement with Parnell and others who believe the community, technical and junior colleges are opening doors of higher education to millions of individuals. However, these are opportunity standards. We agree that community colleges do provide opportunities. But, are community colleges effective through achievement standards? The main problem in community colleges is that certain questions go unanswered. Such questions include: Are community colleges effective? How do we know community colleges are effective? Until these questions are answered, the critics will keep pounding at our door, inviting us to come

out and engage with them in dialog. At present there are no consistent effectiveness indicators in community colleges that serve us well. For that matter, Brint and Karabel could have selected four-year colleges on which to base their study because they are no better in determining effectiveness than two-year colleges.

After having revisited the challenge presented through The Diverted Dream, it is time to organize a response. The complex mission needs to be reflective on how community colleges respond to interested outsiders with evidence they understand. Institutions attempting to document effectiveness need to begin first by establishing priorities and developing a planning model to guide the institution in creating a case for effectiveness through a systematic determination of what results are to be achieved over time. Second, institutions need to constantly gather data at the academic level. Such data might include graduation rates, transfer rates, grade point averages, attrition rates, persistence rates, job placement/upgrading rates, and achievement of student goals. These indicators provide a basis for institutional improvement.

Conclusion

The claims made by Brint and Karabel are important to framing the issues and working toward actively resolving problems or discrepancies within the institution. The Diverted Dream, unfortunately, did not have much effect on the practitioner because it's not part of the sermon they wanted to hear. On the other hand, there are highly respected people in education and other fields who agreed with Brint and Karabel's premise. These folks embrace the thesis and appreciate the methodology used in reaching the conclusions.

To use an example from law enforcement, Brint and Karabel's lesson might be analogous to getting stopped for speeding. When driving long distances, one tends to become complacent with regard to speed limits. All of a sudden a reality check appears in the rear view mirror with red and blue lights flashing. If we're lucky the penalty is a warning as opposed to a citation. Nonetheless, when we get comfortable, enforcement officials are there to remind us to be responsible. We need law enforcement officials just as we need the critics. Critics provide a reality check; however, we can anticipate their watchful eye and avoid crisis by managing properly. As too many speeding tickets may alter one's privilege to operate a vehicle, so may signals or messages that suggest institutions are unable to perform according to expectations alter future operations on the campus. The real challenge to community college practitioners everywhere is to provide evidence of what occurs within the institution. It is time to break with the celebrating of opportunities and fashion a response for ourselves and for the critics that includes effectiveness measures based on achievement. Only then can we celebrate and invite the critics to join us.

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